

THE PISTOL'S POINT

By SEWARD W. HOPKINS

(Continued from Last Sunday's Times.)

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

While Dr. Arnold Stagg, of New York, is visiting his cousin, James Stagg, of Utica, district attorney of Onondaga county, for the purpose of regaining his health, he spends his days riding about the country. One day he rode out to a deserted mill and little church on a neglected highway, where he is just in time to witness the meeting of a rough looking man and handsome young woman, evidently about to elope. Four horsemen, who Stagg warns the couple, the man escapes, and the woman remains in his arms. The horsemen are John and James Lee, the latter's son, and a hired man. The girl is a niece of the Lees, Beatrice Forrest. The Lees believe she was attempting to elope with Stagg, and they force him to marry her at the pistol's point and then go their way, while the girl also rides away. Dr. Stagg tells his strange story to his cousin, who in turn tells him that the girl's father was accused of murdering John Brand and robbing him of a large sum of money. James Stagg is in the midst of his strange story of the murder which Robert Forrest, father of the young wife so rudely forced upon Dr. Stagg a few hours before, is accused.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"He swore that he had taken enough in his pocket to pay the money, but Brand inviting him to ride to Utica, he thought he would go and draw some more money, as he intended to use some the next day in purchasing a small place on the Onondaga Road for him and Beatrice to make their home in. He swore, also, that he left Brand, not where Lee and Enland asserted, but at the road which led to Shadelands. He said he did not pass it, but Brand stopped the horse at the road, stepped from the wagon, and went right home.

"Now, that was all the defense he had. We made mincemeat of it with the two eyewitnesses. Another thing against Forrest was that John Brand was never known, in the whole course of his life, to do a philanthropic act. He had never lent anybody any money for any purpose, except, of course, in the way of business on good security, or as an investment on bond and mortgage. But such an act as Forrest claimed was entirely foreign to Brand's nature.

"Furthermore, there was nothing found to show that Brand made the loan. Of course, Forrest had nothing to produce, and Brand's executors could find no paper. If Forrest had claimed that he had received back from Brand his note and had destroyed it, that would have had some weight. Had he shown a receipt he would have proven that part of his case, but that would not have freed him from the murder.

"But what Forrest did claim was preposterous. He claimed that when Brand loaned him the money he had signed an acknowledgment of the loan, and that Brand had kept it. But when he paid the money Brand had mislaid the acknowledgment, and said let it go for a day or two and he would look it up. It wasn't Brand's way of doing business, and would not wash with the court. The paper was never found.

"Forrest was convicted of murder in the second degree and sentenced to life imprisonment. He is serving that sentence at Auburn now."

So this was the story of Bob Forrest. This explained why Beatrice hated James Stagg.

But it did not explain a good many other things. It did not explain how James was the cause of her elopement. It did not explain that terrified cry to the man in the church window that I was James Stagg's cousin.

The whole thing confused me so that I could not think clearly. "Did Beatrice maintain her father's innocence?"

"Stoutly. She evidently loved him, and he did her. It was the bitterest part to him that he was forever degrading her."

"But if the two witnesses saw the murder and robbery, how did Forrest escape execution? Why was the verdict not murder in the first degree?" "Because the witnesses were at such a distance that they could not see the blow struck. Brand was not shot or stabbed. He was killed by a blow to the head with a club."

"Then, as a matter of fact, he was convicted on circumstantial evidence, notwithstanding that your witnesses were eyewitnesses?"

"Well, I suppose it amounts to that; yes. But, you see, there were discrepancies in Forrest's testimony. He claimed that he left the wagon at the road to Shadelands, while Lee and Enland swore that he went a quarter of a mile past it."

"Who was this Enland?" "A young man from Syracuse, staying with James Lee."

"Then, the money was never found?" "No. Forrest had a snug sum in the bank, which he had deposited on the day of his arrival. I suppose it is there yet. John Lee was made guardian of Beatrice, and as he is rich, I dare say he will take care of it for her."

"Not now," I said, "he is so enraged with her."

"Still she has legal rights. If he does not do the right thing she can apply for an accounting and have a new guardian appointed."

Somehow that beautiful, white, tear-stained face, so full of anguish, came up before me.

"James," I asked, "could a married woman apply for a guardian?"

"Why-I suppose so; but, as a rule, a married woman, whether a minor or not, is supposed to have a husband who will protect her interest."

"Just so," I said, puffing harder on my cigar.

"But she will not be a married woman tomorrow. I will have the marriage annulled."

A wave of unrest swept over me. I pictured that shrinking, delicate girl, left alone to buffet this cold, unfeeling world. If the rich John Lee turned against her, to whom could she apply for a guardian who would protect her interest?

She would, I know, marry that other man as soon as I set her free. But was it not the money that was serving as a bait to him?

I did not know how much money Beatrice had. I did not care. But the girl had seemed so helpless, so absolutely at the mercy of the more powerful what would probably be her end.

We had talked all night. The early dawn was coming in through the library windows. James stretched himself, yawned, and rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "we have had a most exciting night. I wonder what Thorne would say to your rest. But go to bed now. We'll get a little sleep, and tomorrow I will present your case before Judge Morgan and have the marriage annulled."

He was about to take a step from the room when there came a peal at the bell. None of the servants was up.

James stepped to the door himself. I, full of curiosity, followed him. I saw him hand a telegram from a messenger. He stepped back to the library, opened and read the dispatch. Then his face turned the color of chalk. He looked at me with a vacant stare, as if his senses had taken permanent leave of absence.

CHAPTER V.

In Which I Carry Things With a High Hand.

"Well, what the devil ails you?" I demanded, noting my cousin's dazed man. Anything the matter with him or the children?"

"No!" he answered in a hoarse whisper. "Robert Forrest has escaped from Auburn Prison. Been gone since early yesterday morning."

I sank into a chair and feebly held out my hand for the dispatch.

Reading the brief telegram that had been sent to James did not at first reveal me or add to my knowledge. I sat there in a stupor, while James walked up and down the room, now more agitated than ever.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "An escape from Auburn! I thought it impossible. But the man will be retaken. He cannot get very far away."

It was evident that the thought which was searing its way into my brain had not occurred to my astute cousin.

Some after that we went to bed. James, with his usual strength of will, threw off his agitation and slept soundly. There was no sleep for me. The morning sun came in at my window.

I undressed and lay down on my bed, but my eyes would not close in sleep. My mind seemed to be on fire.

I left my bed and paced up and down the room. I said to myself, "I explained things harshly. It explained why Beatrice had cried out to the man at the window that I was a cousin of James Stagg. It explained why she had cast aside all letters but one, and had taken time making the appointment for the meeting at the church."

I understood then why the man had not been alarmed at the presence of the bay. He had expected the girl to ride to the church, and no doubt supposed the horse was hers.

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the influence of the balmy morning breeze, a great resolve grew strong within me. I got up from my chair. I began putting on my clothing. I felt that my face betrayed the strength of purpose born within me that moment.

"Let them say what they will," I muttered half aloud, "I will stand by my wife!"

"What!" Even as I spoke the words a thrill shot through me. That pretty creature my wife! Only till she was safe. Only till the tangled web of the romance and tragedy had been straightened. Then I would set her free.

"Gad!" now she needed, if ever a girl did, a protecting arm. She needed the sheltering name of a man who was strong.

I had sat several hours over the problem. It was no hasty conclusion. If it seems rash and untenable to the reader, it was far from that. It would lose its logical outcome of the affair.

I went downstairs. James was ahead of me, and in his well-groomed figure there was no trace of excitement.

"Gad!" he exclaimed, as I entered the breakfast room. "you do look lunked up. Has your sleep done you no good?"

"I've had no sleep," I answered, and my voice sounded strange even to myself.

"Well, I don't wonder at it. Any man, finding himself dragged into an entanglement of this kind, would lose sleep. But we will settle all that today. Miggles, let us have breakfast."

Miggles responded, and soon the breakfast appeared.

"Yes," continued James, "I shall go to see Judge Morgan as soon as his court has opened. It will not take long to set you free."

"I wish, James," I said, striving to appear at ease and unconcerned, "you would do nothing in that matter just now."

"Eh! Do nothing? I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am going to look into the thing a little. I am not quite sure that I want to be released just now."

I don't think James showed as much astonishment the night before as he did then. He sat back in his chair and stared as if either he or I had turned maniac.

"Say that again," he remarked, with a tremendous attempt to be calm. "Say that again. I don't quite catch on, I fancy."

"Well, there is no bearing around the bush necessary," I answered. "I've spent hours thinking about the matter and I've reached a conclusion. To begin I am not entirely convinced that Robert Forrest had a square deal at his trial."

"You what! You don't think—come now, Arnold, you are not accusing me of conspiring to send an innocent man to prison for life, I trust."

"No, not at all. But all prosecuting officers, whether they are in Onondaga county, New York city, London, or Paris, are usually excessively zealous. A crime is committed. A prisoner is found. Every scrap of evidence discovered by the police is twisted and warped to fit that prisoner."

"The law must be vindicated. A victim must be found. The district attorney has his reputation to make. The testimony of witnesses as to what they saw is not sifted for truth. It goes. Between you and me, I think the Lees are liars. I don't know this Ellis Heavens! Am I hearing aright? Do you intend to reopen the case?"

"To a certain extent I do. My heart goes out in sympathy to Beatrice Forrest—now Beatrice Stagg—in her lonely condition. If her father is innocent, it should be shown. If for no other reason than to remove the misery and stain from her life. If he is guilty, then, more than ever, she needs the protection of an honorable man."

"Suppose your detectives find him, as they probably will. Suppose he is taken back to Auburn? What becomes of her? Her uncle's house is closed against her. She has committed the heinous crime of believing in her father's innocence. Yet there is no home for her and no shelter in. No friend to offer protection."

"She is young and beautiful, as you know. What will become of her if she is left to the tender mercies of this kind-hearted world? You know the ovoid, and so do I. You know the fate of a pretty country girl who is thrust out from the shelter that should be hers. Who takes her up? Your Thomas Firmin? Your man about town? First the gilded flat, then the concert hall, then death in degradation."

James shrugged his shoulders.

"And may I ask what all this is to you? You are a young man of fortune, with a great career before you. Are you going to cast it aside because the daughter of a murderer has been thrown into your life in this way?"

"No, I don't intend to cast aside my future, nor do I intend to do anything inconsistent with good, hard sense. But this girl has, through the mysterious workings of Providence, been sent like a flash into my life. I am not going to shirk the responsibility. You admit, do you not, that she is my wife?"

"Well, yes and no. The marriage will not hold good if either party asks for an annulment."

"Just so. And if neither party asks for it, then mine is the power, the privilege, and the authority to protect my young wife from the cold jeers and taunts of an unfeeling world. And, I let me say here, I am going to do it."

"When I have seen her safe from harm, then I shall offer her the freedom that no doubt she will crave. There is no reason why she should wish to remain my wife. But while she needs a protector, she shall have one in a cold Stagg, your humble servant."

"Do you know what I think? Pardon me, but I must speak my mind. I think you are a damned fool."

"Perhaps I am. But I can afford to be one if I feel like it. You cannot deter me. I shall adhere to my resolution."

"And find the girl who have canonized into sainthood an idol of clay. It is not at all certain that she is not now on the way to New York with her lover to live in one of those gilded flats you just spoke of."

"You don't seem as bright as usual, James. You don't seem to follow my reasoning. It seems certain to me that there was no lover in the case. I think Beatrice went away with her father."

"His jaw dropped and he banged his fist on the table."

"That's so," he said. "I must tell the chief of police that Forrest was at Pawmuc Church last night."

"Tell him what you like," I said. "I am not trying to thwart justice."

"Well, what are you going to do first? You don't know where the girl-I mean your wife-is to be found."

"I know it. I expect the police will find her when they find Forrest. The first thing for me to do is to call on Parson Lee."

"I should think you had had enough of Parson Lee."

"There is just one more thing I want of him. I want a marriage certificate."

James laughed, got up, and left the house.

I was not long behind him. I went to my room, put on my riding boots and jacket, and slipped a .32-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver in my pocket, having seen to it that the six chambers were loaded.

I then had the bay saddled and started off. Somehow a load had been put on my mind, and I was unprepared as my resolve had been, I felt that I was doing right.

The bay was in good form and we dashed away up Genesee Street and through New Hartford at a lively clip.

There was no need for me to ask how far Pawmuc Mills was. I knew pretty well where Pawmuc Mills was. I knew pretty well where Pawmuc Mills was.

Church were situated. I don't think I will ever forget that. And I knew the high chimney I had seen from the little cottage belonging to Shadelands, John Lee's place. And the parson lived in a cottage somewhere on the estate.

But we will not dwell on the ride along. A crowd flew overhills and in a spirit of wantonness, no doubt, I took my revolver and fired at it.

I turned the bay into the grass covered road that had first led me to Pawmuc Mills and my adventure. I rode contentedly on, though slowly.

When I saw the chimney of Shadelands I saw, at the same time, a branch road that had escaped my observation before leading to Lee's place. It had been used, no doubt, when the mill was running. I supposed the entrance to Shadelands was on another road, farther south, leading perhaps to Sauquoiter or Sauquoiter.

Shadelands was surrounded by a stone wall. I dismounted at this at the point I reached first, let the bay nibble at some grass and sprang over the wall. I saw the large house of John Lee some distance away, surrounded by great elms, spreading oaks, and beeches.

Nearer me, and deeper still in the shade of a grove, was a white cottage I had no difficulty in picking out as the parson's.

This cottage had a veranda which was shaded by a row of large trees, and also by some climbing vines that almost shut it in like a wall.

As I stepped upon the veranda, I glanced in at an open window. In a small, snug library sat the parson at a table. At the farther side of the room an open door led to other parts of the house.

The window reached to the floor, and formed the means of reaching the veranda, and sprang over the wall. I saw the large house of John Lee some distance away, surrounded by great elms, spreading oaks, and beeches.

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around the skull of the parson, between the outer and inner shells. The man was quite unconscious, and would probably die unless quick and skillful surgical aid could be worked a miracle.

While I was still examining him a colored woman came in, screamed with terror, and fell down, banging the door with her heels in a frenzy of hysteria.

A man soon followed, and at a glance I recognized him as the fellow called Fitzgerald who had assisted the Lees at the church.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"The par